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# **BEYOND BENGHAZI: THE ROOTS OF LIBYA'S SECURITY CRISIS AND HOW THE U.S. CAN HELP**

Testimony by **Frederic Wehrey**  
Senior Associate, Middle East Program  
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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Challenges Facing Libya since the 2011  
Revolution.**

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Chairman Issa, Ranking Member Cummings and distinguished committee members, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you about the roots of Libya's security crisis and what the international community can do to assist. I bring the perspective of both a scholar who travels frequently to the country for research and a reserve military officer who served at the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli in 2009 prior to the Revolution, and again in early 2011.

Libya after Qaddafi is a country facing a dizzying array of challenges. A weak central government, gutted of institutions by the dictator's idiosyncratic rule, has struggled to assert its authority over vast expanses of the country's territory. The restive eastern region of the country—long marginalized under Qaddafi—has witnessed a worsening spiral of violence between rival tribal factions, Islamists, and remnants of the old regime, as well as calls for greater political autonomy. Porous and ill-policed borders have become veritable thoroughfares for arms smuggling, illicit trafficking, and the movement of armed militants across Africa and the Middle East. Deep and historic political divisions between the western mountains, Tripoli, Misrata, and the east continue to obstruct the formation of a broad-based consensus government, and the drafting of an effective constitution. Long-suppressed grievances by ethnic Tabu, Tuareg and Amazigh have surfaced along the country's southern and western peripheries.

Economically, Libya has suffered from the legacy of Qaddafi's economic mismanagement, poor decisions by its transitional government, and the deleterious effects of the recent eastern oil blockade by militant federalists. In 2012, the country experienced a roughly 104 percent GDP growth; in 2013 it suffered a 6 percent GDP contraction as a result of the variances in oil production. The vestiges of the Qaddafi state, particularly subsidies and dysfunctional welfare institutions, need to be overhauled—but there are few signs of that occurring. If anything public sector salaries and subsidies form a greater proportion of state budget than under Qaddafi; nearly 80 percent of all employees are state employees. The government devotes 60 percent of the budget to salaries and subsidies and 40 percent to debts and contracts with international firms. Even with the return of oil production, this economic mismanagement combined with the depletion of Libya's reserves suggests a bleak outlook.

Mr. Chairman, I have visited Libya four times since the fall of Qaddafi, traveling to the country's major centers of power: Zintan, Tripoli, Misrata, and the troubled eastern city of Benghazi. I have spoken with a range of government officials, Libyan military officers, Islamists, and militia leaders. I want to emphasize that nearly every Libyan I spoke with attributed the current crisis to the enduring legacy of Qaddafi's rule, rather than policies or decisions during the NATO-led intervention. It was Qaddafi's 42-year tyranny that deprived Libyans of even a basic role in governance, pitted tribe against tribe and town against town, wrecked the economy, kept the security institutions of the country deliberately weak, and marginalized the eastern part of the country—which has fueled a witch's brew of militant federalism and Islamist extremism. Overwhelmingly, Libyans remain supportive of the NATO-led operation. And they retain a degree of goodwill toward the United States that contrasts sharply with surrounding countries.

With this in mind, let me offer a diagnosis for Libya's current crisis that moves beyond the headlines and addresses the institutional and political roots of its insecurity.

## **The Power of the Armed Groups**

At the core of Libya's insecurity is the power of its non-state armed formations. Often denoted as "militias," the country's many armed groups are referred to in local parlance as *kata'ib*—brigades—invoking a degree of revolutionary legitimacy that is absent from the term "militia." They vary tremendously in size, affiliation with the central government, regional, tribal or ethnic basis, Islamist outlook, and linkages to political parties. Many did not actually fight in the Revolution but arose after it ended.

Too often, outside observers posit a dichotomy whereby Libyan armed groups are believed to be separate from Libyan society. In fact, the armed groups are deeply and organically rooted across Libya's diverse communities. Their endurance reflects unresolved grievances related to political or ethnic marginalization, distrust of the country's dysfunctional elected body, the General National Congress (GNC), or provincial alienation, as is the case with federalist armed groups in the east. Since 2012, the armed groups have increasingly politicized, using force or the threat of force to compel the passage of a sweeping law barring Qaddafi-era officials from future employment, kidnapping Zeidan, and, most recently, blockading oil production in the east. This politicization is directly related to the absence of effective municipal governance and functioning representative institutions. Weapons are the de-facto currency through which demands are pressed and concessions obtained. "We fought Qaddafi with arms, so now arms are all we know," said one militia member in 2013.

In many cases armed groups have captured illicit trafficking networks and are engaged in what amounts to veritable extortion of the central government. A case in point is the notorious Qaqa Brigade, comprised largely of Zintani members but based in Tripoli. Officially, the Qaqa Brigade affiliated itself with the Chief of Staff, providing border security along the country's porous southwest frontier and guarding oil installations in the southern fields. But the militia was widely known as the most predatory, mafia-like of Tripoli's armed groups. "We decided that our goal is to keep the capital safe," its commander Uthman Mlegta told me in early 2012. "Once everything returns to normal we will give up our arms." What that normalcy will look like his hard to say, especially since the brigade has become increasingly political, acting in effect as the armed wing for Mahmud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (Mlegta's brother is the head of the Alliance's steering committee). In January, Mlegta's brigade threatened to shut down the elected legislature in response to a move to extend the GNC's mandate by his archrivals, armed groups from the powerful city state of Misrata. It was one of several near-coup attempts that heralded a dangerous new chapter in Libya's troubled journey. The crisis was averted only through a last minute intercession by the United Nations. Mlegta himself narrowly escaped an assassination attempt.

If the Zintani and Misratan armed groups were feared for their economic and political predation on the capital, the Islamist armed groups in the east reflect that region's longtime alienation from the center and, increasingly, an embrace of moral piety and purity. The most powerful of the Islamist armed groups arose in the early days of the anti-Qaddafi uprising: the February 17 Revolutionary Brigade, the Rafallah Sahati Companies, the Zawiya Maryrs Brigade, the Omar Mukhtar Brigade, the Ahrar Libya Brigade, and the Annas Ibn Malik Brigade. Their leaders spent time in Qaddafi's notorious Abu Slim prison, a notorious detention center for political prisoners. Some had field experience on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The restless young men of the east flocked to their ranks, drawn by the promise of an ethical code, camaraderie, adventure, and income. Few had other options. On the roster of recruits for one of these units, the Zawiya Martyrs Brigade, a number of pre-revolutionary employment categories appeared with depressing frequency: day laborer, unemployed, mechanic, student. Battling loyalist forces in Benghazi, Ajdabiya, Brega and Sirte, these young men found a new purpose. They forged new bonds. When Qaddafi fell, they found it hard to go back to what they were before.

For some now, there is a refusal to surrender their arms, demobilize and integrate into the formal security apparatus. They demand that the regular security forces first be "cleansed" of Qaddafi-era personnel. This is not simply a political imperative, but a moral one. The Islamists routinely decry state institutions as being irreparably tainted by ethically bankrupt supporters of the former regime. Another precondition is the implementation of a sharia-based constitution that protects the moral sanctity of the army. "We want an army that defends Islamic law and the people not the taghut," the former commander of the Rafallah Sahati brigade Ismail Sallabi told me in November 2013, using the potent Islamic term for "tyrant." Such rejectionism informs the outlook of even more radical groups like the Ansar al-Sharia.

Despite these sentiments, the majority of Libya's Islamists are committed to political participation. This is true even for former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Some of them hold important cabinet and ministerial positions, or have won seats in the country's elected legislature. Libyan opponents of Islamism and some outside observers often apply blanket labels to Libya's Islamists, calling them "al-Qaeda 2.0." Such a narrative is not only inaccurate, but also highly unhelpful from a policy perspective. To be sure, the U.S. has serious concerns about al-Qaeda's presence in the country and the flow of arms and jihadists outside its borders. But it is important not to conflate mainstream Islamists with the more radical factions that remain on the fringes of Libya's society, politics and security institutions.

### **The Weakness of the Army and Security Sector**

Today, Libya's regular army is a largely hollow force, kept deliberately weak and underfunded by Qaddafi who feared its potential for coups. In some parts of the country, the army does not control its own offices, barracks, and ammunition depots. Under Qaddafi, the Ministry of Defense and the

chief of staff's office did not have an institutional base and staffing functions. Because of this absence, the functioning of the security sector is now highly dependent on personality politics and backdoor deal-making with the various armed groups. There is no system for rationalizing the army's procurement, force development, training, and deployment. The police force fares a little better but is unequipped to handle more difficult and hazardous policing tasks.

Under the strong recommendation of Libya's international donors at the 2012 Paris conference, the Libyans set up a National Security Council, but it remains little more than an organizational chart. Much of its hollowness stems from the fact that setting up a coordinating body would mean addressing the stark political disagreements that pervade the upper reaches of the security sector. And this was something that the embattled former prime minister, Ali Zeidan, was both unwilling and unable to do. Consequently, decision-making continues to be stymied by political rivalries between the Minister of Defense, the Chief of Staff, the head of the GNC and other posts.

Ironically, this absence of inclusive security institutions has fueled the widespread perception that the new government is simply replicating the old habits of the Qaddafi state. Without a clear strategic direction and transparency in resource allocation, the country's armed formations have come to suspect that the defense sector and the Interior Ministry are perpetuating the interests of those who served Qaddafi's regime. The young men filling the ranks of the armed formations are reluctant to join the army and police forces given the security, better pay and relatively easier life afforded by the armed groups. For their part, the commanders of the armed groups and their political allies are loath to surrender the leverage of armed force while the country's political institutions remain so contested and while the state is unable to meet the needs of its far-flung provinces.

A key obstacle confronting reintegration and the building of the new army is the military's bloated senior ranks. No one knows how many soldiers are in the Libyan army: the Qaddafi regime gave out officer commissions as rewards, so today there are estimated to be over 14,000 officers with the rank of colonel and above. In essence, the army today resembles an inverted pyramid. The leaders of revolutionary brigades who wish to shape the future of the defense, police, or intelligence sectors believe that the top-heavy ranks of the army leave little room for them to assume positions of authority. For their part, the senior officers of the army have resisted the integration of the revolutionaries, whom they regard as either excessively politicized, Islamist, or ill-disciplined rabble. Reform-minded Libyans and outside advisors have long recommended an early retirement program for many of these colonels. But the process has proceeded haltingly, partially due to a politically motivated campaign to expel officers suspected of loyalty to the old regime.

The Commission for Integrity and Reform of the Libyan Army is essentially an attempt to apply the sweeping Political Isolation Law to the army in a way that is roughly analogous to the de-Baathification campaign applied to the Iraqi Army. Already, the commission has removed large groups of senior officers at a time—numbering anywhere from 500 to 1,000—and many of them had fought against Qaddafi. As in the case of Iraq, the blanket application of the law could not only

deprive the army of much-needed operational experience, but also provoke widespread social upheaval in Libya, as many of these officers have linkages to major tribes.

The government has responded with various schemes to reform and formalize the security sector while attempting to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate the young men of the armed groups. None has succeeded. The country's nascent security institutions are hotly contested between opposing and shifting political constellations, as are the Cabinet and GNC. Each side, therefore, sees any movement on institutional development in the security sector as a "win" for its rivals.

In essence, the country suffers from a balance of weakness amongst its political factions and armed groups: no single entity can compel others to act purely through coercion, but every entity is strong enough to veto the others. The political stalemate explains much of Libya's paralysis on the security sector: the glacial pace behind the development of the Libyan army, the failure of the regionally constituted National Guard project, and the lack of buy-in for a national-level program for demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DRR).

### **The Development of a "Hybrid" Security Sector: Subsidizing the Armed Groups**

Three years after the Revolution, nearly all the armed groups are affiliated in some way with the state. How this arrangement came about stems from a fateful set of policies in late 2011 and early 2012 enacted by the country's weak and unelected transitional government.

Bereft of a way to project its shaky authority and keep order, the National Transitional Council (NTC) tried to establish a measure of control over the armed groups by putting them on its payroll. The idea was to harness the manpower and firepower of the revolutionaries to fill the security void left by the nonexistent police and army and, most importantly, to quell the increasingly frequent outbreaks of communal and ethnic fighting that were flaring up in the western mountains, Bani Walid and the southern towns of Kufra and Sabha. Over time, most of the armed groups subordinated themselves to the Ministry of Defense. Many joined the Libya Shield Forces (LSF), which filled the role of the army and/or the Preventative Security Apparatus, a counter-intelligence and investigative service that arose in the early days of the revolution to root out Qaddafi loyalists. A smaller number in the east joined the Supreme Security Committee (SSC), which roughly approximated the functions of the police, under the Ministry of Interior—although this body was always stronger in Tripoli than other areas.

By all accounts, the results of this hybrid arrangement have been mixed, if not negative, for Libya's stability and its fragile democracy. Libya currently has a fractured, decentralized and hybrid security sector that is marked by the uneasy and frequently hostile interactions between formal and informal actors, with multiple agencies performing overlapping functions, all competing for resources, and, increasingly, pursuing parochial political agendas. The government's subsidization of the Shields and the SSCs had the paradoxical effect of swelling the size of the armed groups as young men flocked to

their ranks, drawn by the promise of a steady salary that far exceeded that of the police and army. “If the Libyan government started paying fishermen,” one friend told me, “then everyone would become a fisherman. So it goes with armed groups.” Today, there are an estimated 165,000 registered “revolutionaries” in Libya, but by some estimates only a fraction of these—perhaps 30 percent—actually fought in the anti-Qaddafi uprising.

Because entire brigades and companies joined the SSCs and Shields, the new structures essentially preserved the cohesion and parochial outlook of the armed groups, albeit under the cover of the state. Having been effectively “deputized” by the government and flush with funds, the armed groups are now even more emboldened to pursue agendas that are increasingly political and self-serving. But perhaps most ominously, the new structures have taken on a life of their own, stymying efforts to build up the regular army. Libyans today refer to Shields and SSCs as a shadow security state, a “third army,” and, even worse, a reincarnation of the dreaded “popular” and “revolutionary” committees that terrorized the country under Qaddafi.

Both the regular armed forces and the police have taken a backseat to the Libya Shield, the SSC, and several other paramilitaries—an ironic mirror of the arrangement that existed in the twilight years of Qaddafi’s rule. Then, the army and police had ceded control of operational tasks to, respectively, the security battalions commanded by Qaddafi’s sons and the internal security service that answered directly to Qaddafi’s office.

There have been a few instances of truly “mixed units” where revolutionaries and the regular army have been fully integrated. But in most cases, there is ambivalence, hostility and a lack of coordination between the two sides. The regular army frequently has hostile relations with the Libya Shield and other paramilitaries. For their part the Shields see the regular army as a hollow, corrupt force that is bloated at the senior ranks. The senior army officers regard the Shields as nothing more than ill-disciplined rabble who are highly politicized and Islamist. The SSCs’ relationship with the police is marked by similar distrust; the police are seen as incompetent and tainted by the legacy of affiliation with the Qaddafi regime.

The new security formations have developed an arsonist and fireman approach to Libya’s security: they justify their continued utility and existence to the fragile government on the basis of their ability to handle neighborhood security, catch drug smugglers, and quell the outbreaks of communal and ethnic fighting in the country’s far-flung provinces. But in many cases the constituent members of these armed coalitions are worsening the country’s instability, by either being directly involved in criminal activity or fighting as partisans in the conflicts they are meant to subdue.

### **Societal Policing: The Role of Local and Informal Actors**

Faced with the weakness of formal state institutions and frustrated at the impotence of the central government, an array of informal actors—tribal elders, municipal councils and religious authorities—

have played a crucial role in quelling violence and policing local communities. These actors have negotiated ceasefires, spearheading local militia disarmament initiatives, and mediating prisoner release between warring clans or towns. They have demonstrated an important and oft-neglected aspect of post-revolutionary Libya—a societal resilience that has kept it from sliding down the path of open civil war.

Civil society and tribal authorities have also acted as checks against more radical armed groups such as Ansar al-Sharia. On multiple occasions in the east, powerful eastern tribes and demonstrators have rallied against the excesses of Islamist extremists, driving them out of certain locales. At the same time, more moderate Islamist figures or respected tribal elders have engaged in dialogue with the radicals attempting to bring them into the political mainstream.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the wake of the tragic killing of the U.S. Ambassador and three of his colleagues. Protestors had mounted similar demonstrations on the compounds of the Ansar al-Sharia and other Islamist armed groups, like the Rafallah Sahati Companies. Later, on June 8, 2013, protestors marched on the compound of the city's most powerful Islamist brigade, the Libya Shield One, headed by a 35-year old former mechanic, Wisam bin Ahmayd. The protestors demanded the eviction of the Shield from Benghazi, the abolition of all armed groups and government-affiliated Shields, with their replacement coming from the regular army and police. Thirty-two people died when the Libya Shield forces opened fire.

Another example of this dynamic at work is the demonstration that occurred in Tripoli last November—a seminal event that came to be commemorated as “Black Friday”—and earlier protests in Benghazi. On November 15, 2013, Tripoli's Local Council organized protests against well-armed Misratan groups that had occupied a former regime compound in the Gharghour neighborhood, which abuts the main road to Tripoli International Airport. The Misratans in Gharghour were long seen as parasitic outsiders in the capital, involved in an array of illicit enterprises, openly flaunting heavy-caliber weapons and, it was later revealed, running their own torture chamber. When unarmed protestors approached their compound that sunny afternoon, forty-six of them died in a hail of gunfire from heavy-caliber weapons wielded by the Misratan militia. Commemorated in nation-wide mourning ceremonies as “Black Friday,” the Gharghour massacre prompted subsequent demonstrations for the withdrawal of Misratan and Zintani militias from Tripoli. At a gathering in Algiers Square the Saturday after the massacre, crowds bore placards reading: “The February Revolution was a popular revolution and not a coup” and “We demand the replacement of the armed groups with the regular army and police.” In the days that followed, the Zintanis and Misratans did evacuate the city.

Although civil society and informal sources of authority have kept the country from descending into total chaos, they are by themselves not sufficient for moving the country forward politically and economically. The challenge for outside assistance is helping Libya achieve a modicum of security that provides space for much-needed institutional and economic growth to occur.



## **Challenges of Outside Assistance: Building the New Libyan Army**

The international community has stepped up its efforts to train and equip a new Libyan national army and police. Since early 2013, the U.S. military's Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Special Operations Command (SOCOM) have been quietly planning to build a new Libyan army and counterterrorism force. The project originated in a plea during last year's G8 summit by then-Prime Minister Zeidan for outside help in building what would later be known as the "General Purpose Force" (GPF), totaling roughly 19,000 new soldiers. When it became clear last summer that Libya's elected government couldn't function free of militia influence, the plan gained greater traction in Washington. The U.S., Turkey, Britain, Morocco and Italy have plans to train and equip the Libyan military at bases overseas. AFRICOM, for its part, will train 6,000 to 8,000 soldiers at a base in Bulgaria. According to a recent Congressional notification, the Libyan government has pledged to pay 600 million U.S. dollars for the training and logistical support. But so far, the U.S. training has stalled because Libya has not provided payment up front.

Pentagon and AFRICOM officials privately assured me that they were asking tough questions about the GPF plan, having learned hard lessons in recent years about building armies in shattered states amid a patchwork of tribal and regional loyalties. "We want to train new units as a whole to ensure that individually trained recruits don't return to Libya and melt back into the armed groups," one AFRICOM official told me. Some officials at the Pentagon expressed concerns about creating a factional militia or even a praetorian guard that might subvert the country's democratic transition. It's not an entirely implausible scenario, given that the British trained then-captain Muammar Qaddafi in the 1960s. Another important imperative is to bolster the institutional structure behind the military, what one official called a "whole of government approach" that includes ministerial reform, payroll streamlining, base infrastructure and, especially, civilian control and oversight.

The most pressing concern, however, is the force's inclusivity. Since it is envisioned to eventually take the place of the Shields in quelling ethnic and tribal in-fighting, its non-partisanship and professionalism must be above question. A top priority, then, is vetting recruits, ensuring that they represent a wide variety of tribes and regions. The U.S. will be putting more boots on the ground in Libya for vetting of the force. But challenges persist.

The greatest challenge to broad inclusion comes from the old guard, the aging members of the Libyan officer corps, who betray an intense contempt for the young revolutionaries, particularly the Islamists. For them, the prospect of integrating militia members into the army would undermine the army itself. "I would rather resign than share this army with those blood idiots," one 20-year colonel told me last fall in Tripoli. These officers resent the various efforts to bring the armed groups under the control of the state, seeing the Shields and the Supreme Security Committees as competition. Even worse, however, is the affront to their status and salary. "Why should a major with 19 years' experience get 800 Libyan dinars, while a militia member of the Shields gets 1,200?" one colonel asked me. The

government recently raised army salaries to exceed those of the Committees and Shields, but it is unclear if this alone will help swell the ranks of the regular forces and compel young men to leave the armed groups. An even more bitter insult to the old cadre is the granting of automatic army ranks to revolutionary commanders.

A similar ambivalence about the force emerged from the country's Islamist militia bosses and their supporters, in Benghazi and across the country. They demand that the bloated senior ranks of the army be purged of Qaddafi-era holdouts before they agree to join it. But their fiercest criticism is reserved for what they saw as Zeidan's opacity and guile in soliciting foreign assistance to build the army. The prominent Islamist commander of Tripoli's Supreme Security Committee, Abdelraouf Kara, told me that Zeidan "doesn't have the right" to go around foreign capitals asking for help in building the army. Other Islamists in the east worried that the new army would become a political tool for the more secular-leaning National Forces Alliance or—even worse—the United States. When U.S. forces—allegedly with Libyan assistance—captured the wanted al-Qaeda leader Nazih al-Ruqai'i (Abu Anas al-Libi), the Grand Mufti of Libya issued a statement wondering if the Libyan young men being trained abroad were getting trained in the art of kidnapping. "The army has to be loyal first to Islamic law," an eastern Islamist told me. "If the state goes against Islamic law then the army should protect Islamic law. We don't want an army that helps foreign powers."

### **Principles for Moving Beyond the Impasse**

Mr. Chairman, to move beyond the impasse, the first step for the international community is to accurately assess the nature of the security challenge in Libya. The framework for understanding the "militia" challenge must move beyond normative questions of "legitimacy" and acknowledge that the armed groups represent certain constituencies, and have become intimately entrenched in the state's security apparatus. The challenge, then, is dismantling and re-integrating the hybrid coalitions of the Supreme Security Committees and Libya Shield Forces that have fallen under the tenuous authority of the Ministries of Interior and Defense.

A second key task is accommodating and even harnessing the power of municipal security structures that involve the informal coordination between tribes and local leaders, regular police, and local armed groups. The nature and extent of these dynamics vary tremendously according to locale, but nowhere are they more evident than in the eastern city of Benghazi. In the troubled epicenter of Libya's revolution, a new security landscape has emerged where formal military forces, tribes, and Islamists work in tense and tenuous proximity, often through "operations rooms" that are meant to coordinate their efforts but are only loosely subordinated to the government in Tripoli. The government needs to invest in security structures that recognize the entrenched localism already at play, rather than trying to forcibly institute a top-down approach that, for many revolutionaries, smacks of the hyper-centralization of the Qaddafi era.

The third and perhaps most difficult task is reforming and bolstering the formal security sector. This will entail reorganizing the defunct defense architecture and training and equipping a new generation of police and army. In doing so, Libya's leaders and outside supporters must ensure that political factions or ambitious personalities do not "capture" the new security entities as their personal militias. Similarly, great care must be taken to ensure that the new forces do not dissolve along regional or tribal lines, or subvert the country's democratic process.

A final imperative is applying the lessons of other post-conflict experiences in demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) in Libya. Too often, Libya is believed to be an exceptional case, where, because of the unique pathologies of the Qaddafi state, the Revolution's grassroots trajectory, and outside intervention by NATO, the challenges of its security sector defy normal paradigms. But a canvassing of DDR and security sector reform (SSR) experiences in other countries reveals a number of truths that pertain to Libya. The most important of these is that DDR and SSR are not solely technical processes. They cannot be accomplished by focusing on the control of arms and structure of security forces at the exclusion of a broader political reconciliation and a solution for the complex set of motives that drive societal support for the armed groups.

With this in mind, the ultimate solution for Libya's security woes resides in the political realm—specifically, the drafting of a constitution, reform of the GNC, and a broad-based national reconciliation under the auspices of the National Dialogue. This is an area where the U.S. and other outside actors can lend advice and measured assistance, but where the ultimate burden must be borne by Libyans themselves.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you here today.